



State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Peter McWalters
Commissioner

TO: Superintendents and School Committee Chairs

FROM: Peter McWalters, Commissioner

DATE: April 26, 2004

RE: Graduation by Proficiency Component of the High School Regulations

This memo is being sent in response to the many comments, questions, and concerns that have been expressed by our colleagues in the field regarding the graduation by proficiency component of the high school regulations. In an effort to minimize the anxiety that some are experiencing, we want to draw your attention to the guidance document for section 5.0 of the regulations that was distributed in February 2004.

Page 12 of the document advises schools and districts about the development of Proficiency-based Graduation Requirements (PBGRs). It notes that **the regulations require districts to establish PBGRs for all students beginning with the graduating class of 2008**. Additionally, it is stated that PBGRs for the Class of '08 must be ready to be fully implemented for Fall of '05. This timeline allows for districts to decide on the PBGRs that will be required for the Class of '08, share that information with next year's incoming freshman and their families, and at the latest, use the 2004-2005 school year to begin planning and initial implementation efforts in preparation for full implementation in the Fall of '05. The timeline also allows for the work that will be done through statewide initiatives, including the establishment of some broadly defined PBGRs approved by the Commissioner, guidance on performance assessments from the Gates Networks, and High School Grade Span Expectations. While these efforts will inform the PBGRs, school districts and schools should begin by identifying PBGRs for the Class of '08 appropriate to their district's goals, objectives and needs and informed by *RI's Common Core of Learning for a New Century* and New Standards Performance Standards.

Figure 3 on page 13 of the guidance document references the process that NEASC has developed to guide the development of the school wide Mission and Expectations for Student Learning. As schools engage in this process they will in fact be complying with the development and implementation of local PBGRs. This is the work that is expected to be completed by Fall 2005 and forms the basis for graduation by proficiency beginning with the class of 2008.

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For Section 5.1 districts are expected to approve standard graduation requirements by May 2004 that apply to ALL students in the district, and will require demonstrations of proficiency for incoming grade nine students who will be members of the class of 2008. **At this time each district should review their current graduation requirements and amend them to ensure that each student successfully acquire(s) 20 units of study (Carnegie Units).**

For Section 5.2 districts must identify the methods that students will use to demonstrate proficiency. Among the choices are departmental end of course exams, portfolios, or public exhibitions (including capstone and senior projects). Although these systems do not need to be fully operational until 2008, districts must identify their choices by May 2004 and are strongly encouraged to introduce the two methods they have selected during the 2004/05 school year. Additionally, **by May 2004 district and school improvement plans must describe how applied learning will be incorporated in the classroom for all students.**

Section 5.3 states that individual student results on state assessments should be used in some manner to determine students' programming, and **may** be used as one of the components for graduation (weighted no more than 10%). **At this time districts should consider if and how the assessment results will be used, and should report assessment results on student transcripts.**

When considering the implications for curriculum, instruction, and assessment, it is important to note that networks supported by a grant from the Gates Foundation will specifically address portfolios, exhibitions, and common tasks. The networks will establish statewide criteria for these demonstrations, create "tool kits" for implementation, and work cooperatively to ensure reliability and validity of these local assessments. Districts should encourage their high schools to participate in these networks to assist them in their developmental and implementation efforts. Information for joining these networks will be forthcoming in May.

The Section 5.0 guidance document identifies three elements that must be considered as districts revise graduation requirements: proficiency, rigor, and opportunities to learn. For "proficiency," it is enough for now that districts identify the two performance measures they will employ for students to demonstrate proficiency. More specific details regarding these measures will be determined when the Gates networks are underway. Defining "proficiency" will take time and can be accomplished as schools engage in the process that NEASC recommends for establishing their Mission and Expectations for Student Learning.

The requirements for broadly defined "opportunities to learn" can be satisfied as districts define the minimum number of Carnegie units (no less than 20) that students must achieve. There can be NO difference between the requirements for college and non-college bound students. The guiding principle for this section is that ALL students must have access to rigorous and challenging curriculum. This can be accomplished through differentiated instruction and flexible grouping, and NOT through rigid tracking systems found in some schools. Additionally, schools must be certain to advise students of the rigorous requirements that some colleges and universities establish for admission that may exceed the school's minimum requirements.

There is still work to be done at the state level to fully define the element of “rigor.” The content, concepts, and habits of thinking that will comprise students’ opportunities to learn (rigor) will be informed by the Grade Span Expectations (GSEs) that are currently being developed through RI’s work with the New England Common Assessment Program, and will form the basis for future state and local assessments. Other crucial developmental work on content and common expectations for high school students is ongoing through the PK-16 articulation work being done between secondary school teachers, the Rhode Island Department of Education and professors at the Higher Education Institution and the Office of Higher Education. Future guidance documents will inform districts of the content, concepts, habits of thinking, reasoning, communication and application of knowledge that must be included. At this point districts should be guided by the *RI Common Core* and the New Standards Performance Standards in designing their PBGRs to ensure rigor across the curriculum for all students.

A template for reporting information requested by RIDE for May 2004 will follow.

Cc: High School Principals
Curriculum Directors
Assistant Superintendents
Special Education Directors